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SUBJECT: A TOUGH YEAR FOR ONCE-LEADING OPPOSITION PARTY

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Dominated by leader Nebojsa Medojevic's outsized personality, the Movement for Change (PzP) -- Montenegro's most popular opposition party at the start of the year -- has plummeted in the polls following Medojevic's disappointing third-place finish in the April 2008 presidential election. PzP officials have focused mostly on external factors to explain this decline, but the party's failure to invest in its local structures and its attempt to be all things to all voters contributed to its problems. With few other centrist opposition alternatives, the PzP has time to turn things around, but another poor showing in the fall 2009 parliamentary election could spell trouble for the party. END SUMMARY.

Riding High In January...

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¶2. (SBU) The Movement for Change (PzP) and its energetic young leader, Nebojsa Medojevic, entered 2008 with high hopes. Established in 2006 as a moderate, pro-European alternative to the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and the Serb nationalist parties, the PzP did surprisingly well in parliamentary elections that year, garnering 11 mandates. Less than two years later, the party was Montenegro's leading opposition force, and the ambitious and charismatic Medojevic was gearing up for a run at the presidency in the April 2008 election. Medojevic and other PzP leaders confidently predicted that he would take votes from the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and opposition parties alike, and was a sure bet to face President Vujanovic in the election's second round.

...Watching The Poll Numbers Drop In June

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¶3. (SBU) What a difference a few months make. Not only did Medojevic fail to progress to a second round of voting, as Vujanovic won outright, with more than 50 percent of the vote, but he came in a disappointing third, behind both Vujanovic and Serb nationalist Andrija Mandic. To add insult to injury, Medojevic finished just a few percent points ahead of Srdjan Milic of the Socialist People's Party (SNP), a candidate who had been all but given up for dead at the start of the campaign.

¶4. (SBU) The PzP and Medojevic are inseparable in the public mind, and Medojevic's poor showing precipitated a slide in support for the party. According to one late June survey, the PzP is now backed by only 10.8 percent of voters, trailing Mandic's Serbian People's Party (14.4 percent) and Milic's SNP (11.1) (Note: The SNP initially had lost many of its voters to the PzP in the 2006 elections). Even worse, these numbers marked a sharp decline from June 2007, when (at 22.4 percent) the PzP had almost twice the support of any other opposition party.

After The Fall, Finger-Pointing....

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¶5. (SBU) PzP leaders are still grappling with how things got so bad, so fast. Asked whether the party was stock-taking, PzP MP Zarija Pejovic told us, "believe me, we've been doing nothing else since April." However, most PzP officials point to external factors. PzP spokesman Koca Pavlovic and party VP Goran Batricevic told us that Medojevic -- as the strongest opposition candidate at the start of the campaign -- was the focus of concerted attacks by Vujanovic and the DPS. In addition, they asserted that Kosovo independence had benefited Serb nationalist Mandic, just as the PzP's support for the Constitution had alienated many Serb voters. (Note: A Bosniak leader also told the Ambassador before the election that Vujanovic's overwhelming lead was likely to discourage some Bosniaks from "wasting" their votes on Medojevic.)

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...And Plenty Of Criticism

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¶6. (SBU) Several PzP officials also conceded that the party's underdeveloped structure played a part. In a telling sign of the PzP's structural weakness, Medojevic struggled to gather the 7,500 signatures required to register for the presidential campaign. And while other parties went door-to-door to mobilize support, the PzP, lacking cadres, concentrated on expensive (the party ended up taking significant loans) but ultimately ineffective advertising. Furthermore, a contact close to the PzP told us that some local party chapters were given only 1,000 euros for the entire campaign.

¶7. (SBU) Outside observers also fingered the PzP's political strategy, and, ultimately, the personality of its leader. For example, leading pollster Milos Besic told us recently that Medojevic's campaign had been too extreme and too aggressive; this turned off many voters, particularly the elderly. (We witnessed an example of Medojevic's hyberbole at a March campaign rally in an Albanian-majority district in Podgorica. Medojevic told the crowd that the election represented, "a clear choice between light and darkness, good and evil...")

¶8. (SBU) Svetozar Jovicevic, a founding member of the PzP who is now an independent analyst, told us that Medojevic had forgotten the party's principles in a chase to attract as many voters as possible. Under Medojevic's guidance, the party had ducked the independence question -- a fact not forgotten by the

pro-statehood DPS supporters that Medojevic had hoped to attract. Then, in the hopes of becoming the opposition's sole candidate, the PzP initially backed pro-Serb radicals in debates over the Constitution -- leading to accusations of betrayal when Medojevic backtracked and supported the Constitution's passage.

Comment

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¶9. (SBU) Looking ahead, it is unclear whether the party, many of whose leaders appear dispirited, has a strategy to recover lost ground before the fall 2009 elections. Their tendency to blame external factors (Kosovo, DPS attacks, etc.) for their party's decline may have deflected attention from necessary organization building, long neglected in a party dominated by the charismatic and controlling Medojevic. The repayment of sizeable debts incurred during Medojevic's presidential run will make organizational development still more difficult. It also is unclear whether the cocky Medojevic will heed advice to stop trying to be all things to all people and stake out consistent positions. The party's lack of clarity on Kosovo recognition and weak response to the Karadzic arrest do not bode well in this regard.

¶10. (SBU) On the positive side, the PzP occupies the centrist political space between the ruling coalition and Serb nationalist parties. It is being challenged by a rejuvenated SNP, but that party still has more appeal to older voters and so-called Yugo-nostalgics than to young Montenegrins the PzP has targeted. There is some sentiment both from within the party and among some independents for a PzP-SNP alliance, to join with several smaller moderate opposition parties. For this to happen, however, Medojevic would need to swallow his pride and come to a power-sharing arrangement with Milic and perhaps others. In the meantime, a poor showing in the next election could splinter this personality-driven party, leaving a hole in Montenegro's political center.

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